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## THE MESSAGE OF GREEK RELIGION TO CHRISTIANITY TODAY

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1. In considering any question connected with Greek religion two misconceptions are met at the outset, which must be dealt with before any correct results can be reached: the conception that Greek religion was identical with Greek mythology, and the conception that, in so far as worship existed, it was the worship of beauty. It is due to the later developments of Greek philosophy, as much as to any other one cause, that the Christian church has laid so much emphasis on the speculative statement of belief—that is, on creeds. The Jewish religion taught: “Thou shalt *have* no other gods before me;” the nature of God comes out in psalm and prophet’s sermon, not in any set creed. And if we turn to the religions of other peoples, it is only in India that we find much insistence on speculative dogma as to the nature of God and man’s relation to God. In the study of some of these religions the preconception that there must have been some definite dogma such as today is stated in creeds, works no harm, for nothing of the sort is to be found; in the case of Greece, however, the student, who has been brought in contact with Greek mythology from the beginning of his study of any literature, all but inevitably fixes on this mythology as the dogmatic statement of Greek belief. That mythology is reduced to a unified form only in modern handbooks he learns but slowly. That the myth never was a dogma, in the modern sense of the term, he may never fully realize.

If one is to ask seriously, “What is Greek religion and its message to Christianity today?” his first task is to get back to the standpoint of the first commandment. He must turn his back on those fascinating pictures of the Olympian world which have inspired so much of later poetry, and fix his thought on the practices of worship and the beliefs which they implied. He may or may not later be able to understand how the Greeks could devoutly worship their gods, and at the

same time listen with composure and satisfaction to tales in which these gods are pictured almost like genii of the *Arabian Nights*. Apollo and Ares fighting on the Trojan plain, Zeus indulging in amours with mortal women whom Hera pursues with relentless jealousy, gods almost deceived by the banquet of human flesh which Tantalus set before them—such were not the objects of Greek worship and religious belief. However much belief in the gods may have been universalized and humanized by mythology, religion always remained something apart from the poetic stories of myth.

“To have a god” for the Greeks meant to worship him with regularity and devotion; to recognize his watchful care on the one hand, or the manifestation of his anger on the other hand, in the experiences of daily life; to seek his guidance for the future. It was assumed that a god felt, and thought, and acted much as did a man. Ideals of right and beauty were perhaps unconsciously assigned to the gods. But as for anything that we should term speculative dogma, it was quite absent from Greek religion. So long as men paid the gods their due, everyone was free to think of the gods as he chose. Perhaps there never was a people with any degree of culture whose religious development was more free and untrammelled. At a festival of Asclepius one might be a scoffer, one an implicit believer in the god’s power to heal, many indifferent to anything except the custom of the city or the meat distributed at the sacrifice; it made little difference so long as the worship went on undisturbed. Mythology is not creed, nor did anything else take the place of our creeds.

2. And it is a misconception to speak of Greek religion as primarily a worship of beauty, just as it would be a misconception to call Christianity a worship of truth or of righteousness. The Greeks did indeed lay a different emphasis from ours on these ideals. It was impossible that their gods should be other than beautiful, else they would be imperfect beings, unfitted to receive the worship of Greeks. On the one hand these residents of Olympus inspired the Greek artist to his best work, on the other hand they were brought nearer to mankind by means of the stone or bronze image; but neither art nor religion limited each other. The beauty of a divine image was never the measure of its sacredness. In the gods themselves beauty was but a part of that ideal nature which was felt to be divine; its importance

was not so much that beauty called forth the admiration of the worshiper, as that it helped to make the gods human without being less divine, and to develop a connection, vital and growing, between the worshiper and his god. The insistence on any human ideal in the divine nature, like the ideal of beauty, means that the gods will rise to a higher plane as the worshipers make progress. The beauty of these divine beings does not need to be formulated in creeds for men to acknowledge its power. It is this phase of the ideal rather than any other which may give to gods a definite place in the physical world and in the social world. Greek gods could not but be beautiful, though the worship of their beauty was only a minor factor in religion.

3. The beautiful human forms of the Greek gods were but one expression for their essentially human nature. "From one mother both (gods and men) have life and breath," is Pindar's phrase for the humanness of the gods and the divineness of man. The gods of other peoples were often vague spirits, more dreaded than the Greek gods, perhaps more lofty because they were more abstract; or again they stood for the tremendous forces at work in the physical world, or they made their home in concrete objects of nature; no other gods stood in such close sympathy with man. In general, the Greek gods differed from man only in degree. Human faults and human weakness, human passions, as well as human greatness and man's noblest ideals, found in these gods their highest expression. The great families of Greece claimed descent from the gods; scarcely a myth but what told of the relations of gods and men; as the gods became less vague and more truly gods, it was the human element in their nature which ever received new emphasis.

It is difficult to understand how modern interpreters of Greek myths should have been misled by the allegories of later philosophers into the view that the Greeks were nature-worshippers. No people has so completely turned from the worship of things to the worship of humanity in its gods. Apollo was never so closely identified with the sun, nor Zeus with the sky, nor even Gaia with the earth, as to obscure in any degree their essentially human character. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, Hephaestus, the divine smith, are not more human than, for example, Demeter, the grain goddess. It is in Demeter herself that one finds

the best example of the mother's love, sorrowing but finally triumphant. Leto is the mother proud of her divine children; Hera, the queenly wife; Persephone, the gentle daughter; Artemis, the maiden loving wild nature; each stands out a personality because she personifies so clearly some human relation.

Greek worship is no less human than the Greek gods. That the symposium after the banquet should begin and end with prayers; that the chief function of religion should be no painful rite, no long and tedious service, no task of the intellect, but a joyous feast on sacrificed flesh; that comedy and tragedy should develop in connection with the worship of Dionysus; that art should be so human in its service of the gods; that even gymnastic contests and horse-racing should come within the pale of religion—all this is so far from our conception of divine worship as to puzzle and confuse the student. The key to this puzzle is simply that every side of man found expression in a human religion. Political assemblies began with worship that was no empty form; for the god cared for the state just as did its citizens. Marriage and the bringing-up of children was at every point under the protection of the gods. Needing bread or wine, men worshiped Demeter and Dionysus; needing health, Asclepius; needing protection for their flocks, Apollo or Hermes or Pan. For a knowledge of the future they could consult the oracles. With the thought of death before them, they listened to the invitation of the mysteries where they might obtain the blessing of the queen of the dead. It is universally true that religion arises to meet human need; but nowhere is this need so widely met, and met in so purely human a manner, as here. It was reserved for another people to work out the problem of sin and forgiveness, but it was in Greece that the problem of the essential unity of the divine and human nature was worked out for the universal history of religion.

4. Because the Greek gods were so intensely human, the intellectual element in Greek religion was dominant. This intellectual side does not manifest itself in speculative dogma, to be sure, until the decay of Greek civilization, but it is present both in the conception of the gods and in the conception of worship. The Greeks to whom Homer sang, no less than the Athenians in the age of Pericles, were an intellectual people, whose view of life was essentially reasonable;

their keen insight laid firm hold of certain great principles of life, and they could shut their eyes to what did not fit into their reasonable scheme of the universe. The clear brightness and serenity of the Olympian world reflects this Greek view of life. The Olympian gods were not, indeed, all of Greek religion; weird spirits and mystic rites to avert or control these spirits, fanaticism, superstition, were never unknown in Greece, but just as the Greek in daily life could turn his back on all that was not reasonable in the world, so the irrational elements of religion found little or no place in the official worship of the Olympian gods.

The Greek view of life starts with the belief that the physical and the human world are controlled by all-powerful divine beings. Reasonable gods make the world reasonable. Their rule is wise and just, and on the whole kindly disposed to man. In particular each city, if not each family, has its divine protector, a special advocate among the gods; so long as he is not unduly neglected or offended by some affront, his power is graciously exercised for the good of his client. Parallel with this belief is the conception that each phase of human activity has its divine patron. Thus the Greeks embodied their philosophy of the world in the Olympian gods—a comfortable philosophy which made the world seem wholly reasonable; nor were any creeds necessary, for in the personality of the gods this view of life found adequate expression.

In the study of Greek worship the very first fact to attract attention is that all ritual falls into two groups. the official ritual of the Olympian gods, and a multitude of other rites which commonly are performed to other spirits in particular localities. Everywhere in Greece were found ancient rites to peculiar local spirits, a substratum of the later religion; the official religion of the state was modified by these rites, and it was modified also by that strange revival of religion which swept over Greece in the name of Dionysus in the seventh and sixth centuries B. C.; yet the normal type of worship corresponded closely to the nature of the Olympian gods. A human king would be honored by processions and gifts and public banquets. Worship was reduced to this purely rational form. Votive offerings were dedicated in the temples of the gods, processions were held in their honor, and at the sacrificial banquets the worshipers shared a

feast at which the god presided. This very simple principle—that the world was governed by kindly Olympian rulers—served as a rational principle for religion and for daily life.

5. Such is the influence of Greek mythology on our thought of the gods that it is difficult to realize the local nature of Greek worship. Two related facts are here involved: (1) the worship of any one god—e. g., Athena—is never quite the same at any two points; and (2) the cults of different gods in any one city are practically independent of each other. The first is the question of separatism as applied to locality, the second is the same question as applied to time and the calendar.

The local character of the gods in worship is a fundamental fact of Greek religion. In myth it is the same Athena who is honored in Thessaly and Boeotia and in Attica; in worship the maiden-goddess of the Athenian acropolis is wholly independent of the water-goddess of Alalcomenae and the Itonian war-goddess. Artemis, the goddess of the hunt at Agrae south of the acropolis, is not the same as the Brauronian Artemis on the acropolis, whom young women worshiped before marriage, and she in turn is different from Artemis Hecate, at the entrance of the acropolis, and from Artemis Boulaia, goddess of political wisdom, whose shrine was in the market-place. Even Zeus was worshiped under different aspects—a god of winter storms at Athens, a god of sun and rain on Mount Lycaeus, the divine ruler of all Greece at Olympia. It would seem that the wider relations of any god were forgotten in each particular worship, obscured by the fundamental fact that this local form of the god was the special patron of the worshipers who gathered at that one shrine. This same intimate relation between a particular phase of the divinity and his worshipers reappears in later Europe in the special worship of different forms of the Madonna. “Our Lady of Mount Carmel” is patron of the Carmelite monks; “Our Lady of Mercy,” of the Order of Mercy; “Our Lady of Victory” was worshiped in Florence; we even find a special form of the Madonna worshiped in a particular family. In these cases, as in the Greek local cults, the relation of the divinity to his worshipers is peculiar and intimate; moreover, this relation is reinforced by the place of worship and its sacred traditions.

Along with this independence of the local shrine from foreign

influence there appears a striking independence from the influence of neighboring shrines. Each god or goddess is treated as if no other gods existed; in a sense the different centers of worship at Athens are mutually exclusive, while they exist amicably side by side. When, for example, Dionysus was being worshiped, Athena and Artemis and Poseidon may have been mentioned in the prayers; at some festivals other gods than the one worshiped were invited to share the repast; nevertheless, the worshiper's attention was concentrated for the time being on one god just as truly as if no other god existed. Without interfering at all with the polytheism of myth, worship was essentially monotheistic; i. e., it was the worship of one god at a time as though he were the only god. The third book of the *Odyssey* describes two sacrifices: at the sacrifice to Poseidon there is no thought of any other god, and the next day, when sacrifice is offered to Athena, there is no mention of Poseidon's existence. With another kind of animal and a slightly different ritual, the attention of the worshiper is absorbed in another god. The local nature of Greek religion means that there were as many religions as there were cities, or rather as many as there were individual shrines in each city. Between these countless religions there were many bonds, but from the standpoint of worship they were essentially distinct.

6. Closely connected with the local nature of Greek religion, both as cause and as effect, is the relation of worship to the state. The modern conception of a state church, like the modern conception of freedom of worship protected by the state, must be set aside as inapplicable. It would be nearer the truth to say that every social group was a religious unit just as much as a political unit. Every local cult was in the hands of the state or of some division of the state; conversely, every element in the state was distinguished by its own peculiar worship. The connection was a vital one in that the tribe or deme or family consisted of persons (hypothetically) descended from some one divine ancestor; even the state, even the whole Greek people explained its unity on this principle; that the same divine blood flowed in the veins of its members. A religious adoption was necessary to make foreigners citizens, just as a religious recognition was necessary to bring children into the state.

It is unnecessary for my purpose to describe in detail how this



connection of worship with the political organization was worked out. In general, the administration of each religious center belonged to the political unit with which it was connected. The accounts of the priests were rendered and audited like those of any other public official. Religious law was administered in the last instance by the same courts as the law of the state. The institution of new worship or the revival of old worship took place by vote of the political assembly. On the other hand, the political assembly always sought the guidance of the gods in important matters; justice was administered in the name of the gods; in particular all interstate matters stood under divine protection. There was no "state church" for the reason that state and church were essentially one from the time when the king was the only priest and his palace the central sanctuary of the state, down through all Greek history.

7. The failure of Greek religion was due in the last instance, not to the religion itself, but to the people. When state and church were so intimately connected, the same forces which destroyed the power of the state inevitably weakened the organization of religion. An individualism which undermined patriotic devotion to the state undermined devotion to the state worship. The spread of education and popular philosophy, the increase of luxury in the home, the dissipation of those high ideals which marked the early development of Athens, were tendencies which weakened the organization of religion, if not religion itself. Nor was the democratic state strong enough to overcome the centrifugal forces which affected religion.

The result of this disintegration was that, from the fourth century on, philosophy and ethics and art, the pursuit of the true, the good, the beautiful, cut loose from organized religion. The pageantry of the state worship remained, and superstition remained, but men sought an answer to the great questions of life along independent lines. Although the contributions of this later philosophy to Christianity were most important, they came through philosophy, not through religion.

8. A comparison of the present age and its civilization with the decay of Greek civilization has been drawn by several recent writers. Both periods are not other than religious; the failure of organized religion to keep its hold on much of what is highest in thought and life

is in a measure characteristic of both. The plain lesson of Greece is that an organization of religion which places a false emphasis on any of the elements which enter into it, is doomed. Such is the hold of tradition on methods of thought and activity that it is difficult to keep any organization perfectly plastic to the highest ideals of a progressive age. Any failure means that science and philosophy and art will claim the devotion which properly belongs to religion; "ethical culture" or scientific devotion to truth may become more religious than the church, if the church does not claim its fullest, highest heritage.

The first question, then, which a study of Greek religion suggests to Christianity today is whether we make a fitting place in our religious life for every form of human ideals. The fundamental principle of life for the Greek was the principle of measure or proportion. Is there any ideal of righteousness or devotion to truth which does not find fullest recognition in the church? For, if the church does not claim the highest forms of these ideals as its own, it cannot claim to furnish a religion that is adequate for our age. Is sympathy for human weakness perfectly balanced by a demand for righteousness? Does the legitimate effort to extend and maintain its influence never weaken either the power to be sympathetic or the sense for right? Again, does the church cultivate our love for beauty and fully utilize it for religious ends? We may learn from Greece that nothing gives religion such a hold on humanity, that no single ideal is so universally and subtly elevating, as the beautiful. Just because the love of beauty often serves as a substitute for real religion, there is the more reason that the church utilize it in the service of religion.

Various other questions are raised by the study of Greek religion. Is there any reason why the Protestant church should not utilize local associations far more than it does? Are we right in drawing lines of division between the natural and the supernatural? And cannot our worship be so adjusted as better to include God and man and the world in one scheme? Are long creeds necessary, or can we develop deep-rooted faith in a personal God which shall find constant expression in life rather than in words?

I should like to pass by these questions to call attention to one that is even more important. The very core of Greek religion is its wor-

ship of humanity in and through its gods. The belief in an essential unity between the nature of God and the nature of man lies at the root of every form of religion. No more complete expression for this fact has ever been found than the Christian doctrine of Jesus the perfect Son of God. And yet no one can turn from the study of Greek religion to modern Christianity without asking whether the church is realizing all that this doctrine means. Is the humanity of the divine Christ a vital factor in our life and in our worship? The Greek conception of the relation of gods to the world was far too simple to cover the facts of experience, but we may well ask whether any conception of the world is truer which leaves in the background of vague obscurity the belief that human nature gives the best clue there is to the nature of that power which governs the world. In so far as we practically fail to lay hold on a god of human sympathies as the fundamental fact of life, we have much to learn from Greece.